FRANCESCO NEGRI, THE KRAKEN AND THE SEA SERPENT

Michel Meurger

French folklorist and Fortean Michel Meurger, author of *Lake Monster Traditions* and numerous other works in French and English on the cultural aspects of Forteana and cryptozoology, re-examines the legend of the Kraken and its sources, and finds that it's not quite the beast it's supposed to be.

This study is dedicated to Robert J.M. Rickard

1. INTRODUCTION: HAS THE KRAKEN REALLY AWOKEN?

The shortcomings of a purely naturalistic interpretation of legendary creatures are especially blatant in the case of Scandinavian sea monsters. Here, cryptozoologists may be viewed as *traditionalists*, the heirs of an unquestioned framework built by scientists of the Enlightenment, and revealed to the masses by Victorian popularisers.

The affair of the kraken, the "largest and most surprising [creature] of all the animal creation" **[1]**, fully illustrates the coarseness of an approach built on an inflexible translation of cultural data into ichthyological ones.

Thus in his book *Le Kraken et le poulpe colossal* (1958) Bernard Heuvelmans not only closely follows the methodological proceedings of past authorities, such as Pierre Denys de Montfort, but sometimes he also rehashes the old arguments and questionable associations of his predecessor. On this level, this wonderfully documented study may be seen as one of the last links in a long chain of euhemeristic interpretations of seamen's folklore **[2]**. For centuries, the speculative identities bestowed on the kraken changed, while theorists steadily clung to the tenet of a single zoological presence behind the legend. The scientific godfather of the creature, Erik Ludvigsen Pontoppidan, when identifying the kraken in his *Natural History of Norway* (1752-1753), wavered between a giant starfish and a colossal octopus **[3]**.

Pontoppidan, Bishop of Bergen between 1746 and 1764, gathered during this time all the available material on the sea monster; yet, his falterings are proof of the difficulties in offering a firm answer in zoological terms. Denys de Montfort's own analysis was not restrained by such hesitations. He firmly stated that the living kraken was a giant octopus **[4]**.

In the second half of the 19th century, after the stranding of giant squids on Newfoundland beaches, popularisers quickly assimilated the kraken to such tentacled monstrosities, and Pontoppidan's portrayal of the creature was reinterpreted to correspond to *architeuthis*.

John Ashton, the author of *Curious Creatures in Zoology* (1890), says of the kraken that "this enormous monster, peculiar to the Northern Seas, is scarcely a fable, because huge Calamaries are not infrequently seen" **[5]**. Nowadays, the identification of the Norwegian monster with a giant squid remains firmly grounded in popular consensus. Indeed, for Richard Ellis, the kraken, "somewhat reduced in size, assumed a biological reality as architeuthis" **[6]**. Well, not only reduced in size, but also amputated of all incredible features, to comply to the rules of scientific verisimilitude. We have in fact *two* krakens: the kraken of the fishermen, and the kraken of scholars and popularisers. The cephalopodian kraken has been constructed as a decontextualised version of a traditional sea monster. Pontoppidan was the first to sever all the sociological bonds between the monster and a fishing-oriented culture, to reduce it to the status of a mere zoological puzzle.

---

1 – Erik Ludvigsen Pontoppidan: *Det förste Forsög paa Norges Naturlige Historie*. Kiöbenhaven, 1752-1753; *The Natural History of Norway*. A. Linde, London, 1755, II, chapt. VIII, p.211. I have used this translation [hereafter: *N.H.*]. Ideally, of course, one should write 'krake', krake*n* being the plural.

2 – See Bernard Heuvelmans: *Dans le sillage des monstres marins. I. Le kraken et le poulpe colossal*. Plon, Paris, 1958.

3 – Pontoppidan: *N.H.* II, pp.212, 217.

4 – Pierre Denys de Montfort: *Histoire naturelle, g»n»rale et particulière des mollusques*. F. Dufart, Paris, an X: 1801-1802, p.256. Denys de Montfort calls the monster *poulpe kraken* 'kraken octopus'.

5 – John Ashton: *Curious Creatures in Zoology*. Cassell Publishing Company, New York, 1890, p.261.

6 – Richard Ellis: *Monsters of the Sea*. Robert Hale, London, 1994, p.125.

Yet, in failing to take account of the folkloric context of the kraken, literalists are not even accurate at the naturalistic level. For example, it is difficult to reconcile the classical description of the kraken, as a "round and flat" creature, "full of arms or branches", with the cigar-shaped body of a giant squid **[7]**. Even if we choose the rather unlikely Heuvelmansian explanation of the monster as a *school* of giant squids **[8]**, we remain on unsafe ground. In all the literature on the topic, there is never any mention of one of architeuthis' most familiar features, the two long and slender tentacles with clublike ends.

Let us now consider the hunting behaviour of squids. They are often fast-moving creatures, shooting forward like an arrow and clasping the prey with their tentacles. This is nothing like the Pontopiddanian kraken: far from chasing its quarry in the open sea, it is described as a bottom dweller, making rare appearances at the surface to catch fish. The huge creature comes lazily from the depths, seizes the prey with its numerous *horns* and sinks again slowly **[9]**. True, the kraken's morphology has some affinities with the octopus's, but again, it is hard to find any analogy between their hunting behaviours. Octopuses often lie in wait in a crevice, until their prey comes within reach. They stay anchored using some of their tentacles, grabbing their quarry with the others. They don't rise dramatically to the surface to catch their prey. Moreover, common cephalopodian features such as beaks and suckers are suspiciously lacking in tales of encounters with the kraken. In fact, we are urged to believe in the cephalopodian nature of a monster which is devoid of the main characteristics of those marine animals.

The main fault in the kraken-as-squid thesis is that it pretends to solve the riddle in a monocausal way. No single animal answers completely to all the definitions of the titan of the northern seas; its figure seems rather to incorporate *various* real or imaginary creatures, and even some 'things', such as animated reefs and living islands. Century-old beliefs of quite different origins are mixed under the same name. Reintegrated in its cultural matrix, the kraken appears as composite as the *skrimsl* from Iceland **[10]**.

Then we have the second star of Norse monsterdom, the sea serpent. While the question of the identity of the kraken appears (falsely) to be already settled, the reality and zoological status of this sinuous denizen of the ocean remains, on the contrary, a matter of controversy. Pontoppidan emphasised the geographical location of the monster: "Our coast is the only place in Europe visited by this terrible creature" **[11]**.

For the Bishop of Bergen, as proven by his use of the verb *visit*, the *sjæorm* or sea serpent was clearly a flesh-and-blood entity. Alternatively, one can say that it is certainly an age-old icon of Scandinavian culture. Witnesses during the Age of Enlightenment described the creature as snake-like, with a horse head or a mane. Now since the Bronze Age (2000-1800 B.C.) we find engravings of maned serpents on Nordic bronze razors; one sculpture, found in Faardal, in Jutland, shows a woman worshipping a horse-headed reptile, whose body is stretched into the *vertical* undulations attributed to the sea serpent by later informants **[12]**. We are not working on the thesis of a linear continuity between such works of art and historical testimonies about the *sjæorm*. Yet the existence of such objects should be a warning for cryptozoologists not to posit naturalistic origins too hastily for a creature already present in the religious world of Old Scandinavia, and still depicted on works of Norwegian folk-art when Bishop Pontopiddan gathered information about these sea

---

7 – Pontoppidan, *N.H.* II, p.210.

8 – Heuvelmans: *Le kraken*, pp.211-221.

9 – Pontoppidan, *N.H.* II, pp.211-212. In fact, we know so little about architeuthis that teuthologists are divided into two camps concerning its hunting habits. Some hold that the giant squid is a feeble swimmer, lurking in the dark depths and waiting for its prey to come within range of its tentacles; others see it as an active hunter. See Richard Ellis: *The Search for the Giant Squid*, Lyons Press, New York, 1998, pp.121-125. See also pp.240 and 248, on the controversial question of schools of giant squids. Passive predator or aggressive creature, architeuthis is not accustomed, like the legendary kraken, to rise regularly to the surface to take its quarry. On the contrary, the giant quid seems to feed at great depths, specimens found floating at the surface of the sea being generally dead or moribund.

10 – On the *skrimsl*, see M. Meurger: "Of Skrimsl and Men. Icelandic water-beings from folklore to speculative zoology" in *Fortean Studies*, volume II, London, 1995, pp.166-176. On the moving island, see: "Isola vivente" in Massimo Izzi: *Il dizionario illustrato dei mostri*. Gremese, Roma, 1989, pp.182-183 and p.419 bibliography. Izzi's book is the most exhaustive work on monsterdom.

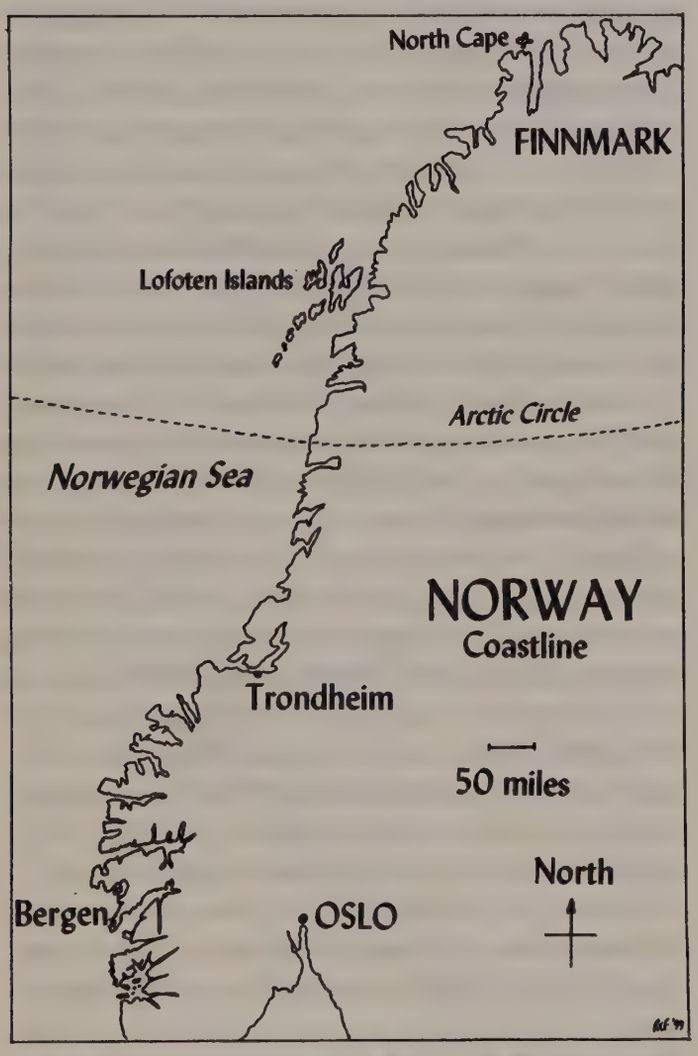
11 – Pontoppidan, *N.H.* II, p.196.

12 – Michel Meurger: *Lake Monster Traditions. A cross-cultural analysis*. Fortean Tomes, London, 1988, introduction, pp.24-25.

monsters **[13]**. At this time, the horse-maned serpent was a well-known figure, both in pictorial representation and oral transmission. What Norwegians reported having seen at sea was therefore congruent with traditional models. Still, all we know today about this belief-system has been filtered through the interpretive channels of naturalists. Scandinavia's intelligentsia set the model for this rationalistic approach to monsterdom; Heuvelmans is quite right when he admits Pontoppidan into the ranks of the founding fathers of his discipline.

2. THE MAN WHO WANTED TO CATCH THE SEA SERPENT

Yet, long before the appearance of the *Natural History of Norway*, a forgotten Italian cleric travelled through the northern parts of Europe, noting all the peculiarities and wonders of its little-known realms. He is the first authority to have given a description of the kraken, and the data he gathered about the sea serpent are also of interest. This investigator should also be considered as a forefather of Pontoppidan, due to his zoologically-oriented approach to the question of Norse sea monsters. I will translate in the following pages the most relevant passages of his work. Let us open the *Viaggio Settentrionale* (1700) by Francesco Negri.



The area of Norway travelled by Francesco Negri. (Map by Richard Furlong)

Negri (1623-1698) was a priest from Ravenna, an extremely erudite man, and fond of Nordic marvels. Such an interest makes sense if we remember that it was in Italy that the great Renaissance expert on Scandinavia, the Swedish prelate Olaus Magnus (1490-1557), had published first his *Carta Marina* (1539), and then his masterpiece, the *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus* (1555), issued from his own presses in Rome. An Italian translation appeared in 1564 **[14]**. The *Historia*, a truly encyclopaedic work illustrated with some 480 woodcuts, was not only influential amongst Italian scholars, but also helped fill the minds of poets such as Torquato Tasso (1544-1595) with images of a cold, dark and magical North **[15]**. Negri, realizing that no one had ever written on "Scandinavia, having travelled through its whole territories, and above all, in its more northern districts" **[16]**, decided to undertake a journey toward this part of the world; he travelled in the subarctic regions from 1663 to 1665. The moment was well-chosen. The Swedish ex-queen Christina lived then in Rome, while her bellicose cousin king Charles-Gustav had died in 1660, at the end of a disastrous war with Denmark. Peace reigned for some time among the boreal kingdoms, and a lonely traveller ran no risk of being arrested as a spy. In a time of difficult and slow communications, our Italian, untutored in native languages and travelling on foot, managed to visit Sweden, Lapland as far as the North Cape, Norway and a small part of Finland, using the *Historia* as a guide. In 1666, back home in his native land, this extraordinary man began to write a book on his travels. Around 1675, seeking a sponsor for publication,

13 – See for example M. Meurger: *op. cit.*, pp.26, 29.

14 – Olaus Magnus: *Historia delle genti e della natura delle cose settentrionali*. Appreso i Giunti, Vinegia, 1565, ex. BNF: M.1290. On the *Historia*, see the introduction to Olaus Magnus: *Description of the Northern Peoples*, edited by Peter Foote, The Hakluyt Society, second series, volume 182, London, 1996, vol. I, pp.xiii-xxii.

15 – On the influence of Olaus Magnus, particularly on Tasso, see Carlo Ossola: *Autumno del Rinascimento*. Olschki, Firenze, 1971, pp.210-212.

16 – Francesco Negri, as quoted by Roberto Weiss: "Francesco Negri, voyageur italien du XVII^{e} siècle en Laponie et au Cap Nord" in *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*, 48, Helsinki, 1947, pp.97-130 p.107.

Negri got an audience with the Grand Duke of Tuscany, Cosimo III de Medici. The Court of Florence was then an important centre for scientific studies.

Here, the priest from Ravenna met the prince's librarian, Antonio Magliabechi, with whom he remained in contact by letter. From a letter sent to Magliabechi in 1679, we learn that Athanasius Kircher (1601-1680), the famous Jesuit scholar, had expressed interest in Negri's manuscript. Unfortunately, Kircher died one year later. Negri never saw the publication of his great work, which finally appeared in 1700 under the title of *Viaggio Settentrionale*. The book was reissued in 1883 **[17]**. It is difficult to do justice to such a study in a few words. A man of his land and time, Francesco Negri may, from one point of view, be compared to Jacopo Ligozzi, court painter of the Medici, and creator of truly accurate colour drawings of plants and animals for the great naturalist Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522-1605) **[18]**. What Ligozzi, a generation before him, accomplished with the brush, Negri tried to render through the quill. Magnus gave a horrifying description of the great whirlpool of Norway, *moskenstraumen*, writing that careless mariners are "swallowed up in an instant by the sudden swirl of water" **[19]**. The Italian traveller tries to remain sober. Stating about the awe-inspiring chasm "Io l'ho veduto" (I have seen it), Negri admits that he has not observed the impressive sight of boats and whales being sucked into the whirlpool **[20]**.

Yet, one should not overemphasize the traveller's rationalism. Francesco Negri stays midway between a world full of hidden presences, and the disenchanted cosmos of modern science. As a priest, he believes in ghosts and demons. In Sweden, Negri had heard about water spirits, such as the *nek*, lurking under the surface of lakes, ready to seize and strangle swimmers **[21]**. Striving towards scientific accuracy, but fond of wonders, the Italian was delighted to discover that Norway, "fulfilled so well my expectations that each day, nay, each hour is loaded with new and rare sights, and especially with various and prodigious natural phenomena" **[22]**.

Now, travelling through the realm of his dreams, the scholar is careful to present sea monsters as astonishing but *natural* creatures. Olaus Magnus had already alluded to the "serpent of vast magnitude", living "in rocks and caves toward the sea coast at Bergen" **[23]**. Now having reached this important town and port on the Atlantic, our traveller tried to check the information provided by the Swedish bishop. His ignorance of the native language, of course, restricted his circle of informants. These people were surely recruited among the social elite using Latin as a vehicle, such as priests or tradesmen. Bergen belonged to the Hanseatic League, with German merchants living in a special district of the town, called the *Tyskebryggen*. Olaus Magnus mentioned sea traders among the people spreading stories about the sea serpent. One has to remember that Negri's informants, men of book-learning, would doubtless conceive the *sjœorm* in quite different terms to illiterate fishermen. What follows may be understood as one version of a complex topic. According to the *Viaggio*:

> In this sea, one may observe a certain sort of snake of a prodigious size: it looks like a land snake, but it is also endowed with a double mane, hanging on its neck from both sides; it moves by a spiraling or rolling motion (*si muove a spiri o in giri*) and at high speed pursues small skiffs manned by a few men, never trying to attack bigger boats. Such a snake showed itself a few years ago in the open sea, in front of this harbour, and was observed by all the inhabitants (of Bergen) congregated on the beaches to look at this sight **[24]**.

Due to the immense size of such a water snake (a "hundred steps"), a swarm of them would be suffi-

---

17 – *Il Viaggio Settentrionale di Francesco Negri*. A cura di Carlo Gargiolli. Nicola Zanichelli, Bologna, 1883 [hereafter: *V.S.*].

18 – On Ligozzi, see Eugenio Battisti: *L'Antirinascimento*. Feltrinelli, Milano, 1962, pp.269-270.

19 – Olaus Magnus: *A Description of the Northern Peoples*. Volume I. Edited by Peter Foote, 1996, book two, chapter seven, p.100.

20 – Negri : *V.S.* Letter 7, p.359.

21 – *V.S.* Letter 2, p.191. See on the Norwegian nøkk, the Finnish nökk, Meurger: *Lake Monster Traditions*, pp.293, 26; on 15 June 1599, a *näcken* was sitting on a stone below the bridge at Norrköping Sweden, see Sven Rosen: "Joan Petri Klint. A Swedish Protofortean of the 16th Century" in *Fortean Studies*, volume I, London, 1994, pp.151-181, p.172. In the same passage, Negri mentions a Swedish nature spirit, the *scogs-rö*, and gives this etymology: *scogs* [*skog*]: wood, and *rö*: commander, they appear in woods as beautiful women. According to John Lindow, in recent tradition, "the rå is generally regarded as a female figure, usually rather attractive, with jurisdiction over a specific area of nature". *Swedish Legends and Folktales*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1978, introduction, p.36.

22 – Negri: *V.S.* Letter 6, p.312.

23 – Olaus Magnus: *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus*. Rome, 1555, book XXI, chapt. XLIII, p.771.

24 – Negri: *V.S.* Letter 5, pp.302-303.

cient to destroy the whole Norwegian fishing industry. But the Supreme Judge has wisely allowed the most moderate breeze the power to force this Leviathan to return to the depths. Therefore, the '*sciu-orm*' (*sjœorm*) appears on the sea's surface only during the dog days, in a complete lull. At such times, fishermen may escape the monster by a whole set of counter-measures, such as by dipping castoreum into the water (this substance forcing the creature to dive) or by throwing it a piece of wood to play with. They may also steer their skiff towards the sun. Such tricks were so adequate, that during his inquiry, Negri found only one case of an attack resulting in a drowning.

All this material fits closely with the information that would be published half a century later by Pontoppidan. In his *Natural History of Norway* we find the same motifs of the serpent with a mane, the apparition restricted to the hottest summer days and calm weather, the breeze sufficient to make the serpent dive again, and fishermen's tricks such as castoreum, floating wood, or sailing towards the sun **[25]**. To cryptozoologists, eager to interpret the fishermen's precautions literally, let us say that whalers and seamen used the same smelly substances or floating wood against the half-legendary 'bad whales' **[26]**. Trying to interpret the *sciu-orm* as a living animal, Negri, like Father Kircher, is still embedded in an intellectual world replete with the arcana of natural magic, and the occult properties of stones, herbs and animals. Pondering the *sciu-orm*'s origins, our Italian scholar attributes them to spontaneous generation. For Negri, Norwegian peat bogs are natural brooders where a chemical combination of elements begets monstrous snakes, born of decay. Some of them are already distinguished by a mane. Then: "One can conceive that such land snakes after some time became aquatic creatures, gaining lakes first, then compelled to reach the sea, a place where they may still grow to inordinate lengths; they had been sometimes observed (during such a journey)." Negri uses the sightings of reptiles with manes, both in lakes and in the ocean, as a proof of this gradual change of surroundings **[27]**.

It would be false to view Negri as the theoretical father of such Mutationism. In fact, the traveller is simply alluding to a native *systema naturae*, of popular origins, mentioned later by Pontoppidan:

> It is said by the people who inhabit the coast that they [the sea serpents] are not generated in the sea, but on land, and when they are grown so big that they cannot move about on the rocks, they then go into the sea, and afterwards, attain their full growth **[28]**.

Later, the clergyman will give a fuller account of this folk concept:

> Others suppose that the sea snake does not breed in the sea, but on dry land, and that it lives in rocks and woods, till it can no longer be concealed and then betakes itself to rivers in order to get to the sea. There are some that pretend they have seen all this **[29]**.

According to an old Nordic belief, when a common snake grew to a huge size, it gained a mane and became a *lindorm*. Magnus's description of the "large serpent" with "a row of hair two feet in length, hanging from the neck", making insecure the coast of Bergen, seems to allude to a *lindorm* in the last stage of its metamorphosis, ready to become a full-grown *sjœorm* **[30]**.

Bishop Pontoppidan rebutted this folk-mutationism. He interpreted the sea serpent as a 'fish', emphasizing the marine dimension of the monster, at the coast of its land and fresh-water stages, thus predisposing future generations of researchers to study the sea serpent question as an independent venture. His predecessor, Father Negri, however, was still fascinated by the spurious lore of biological mutations, and made of the various adaptations of the *sciu-orm* one example in a general law, adding exotic references to support it, as in the case of the: "famous quadruped from Japan, staying on land during the first half of its life, then taking to sea during the second half" **[31]**.

Father Negri shares with Kircher not only a spe-

---

25 – Pontoppidan, *N.H.* II, pp.200, 196, 203.

26 – See Meurger: "Of Skrimsl and Men", p.172. Ashton, quoting from Olaus Magnus about the cetacean *physeter* states that seafarers protect their boats "by casting out huge great vessels, that hinders this monster's passage, or for him to play withall". *Curious Creatures in Zoology*, p.216.

27 – Negri: *V.S.* Letter 5, p.306.

28 – Pontoppidan, *N.H.* II, p.38.**32** – Negri: *V.S.* Letter 7, p.360.

29 – Pontoppidan, *N.H.* II, pp.38-39.

30 – See M. Meurger: "The Lindorms of Småland" in *Arv. Nordic Yearbook of Folklore 1996*. Volume 26. The Royal Gustavus Adolphus Academy, Uppsala, Sweden, pp.87-98.

31 – Negri: *V.S.* Letter 5, pp.306-307. Kircher himself mentioned a similar story about a fish from China, living in water in winter, then losing its scales in springtime, to get feathers and to fly in the woods until next autumn. Francesco Redi, 1626-1698, the great physician and naturalist, reproaches him for believing in such nonsense. See F. Redi: *Esperienze intorno a diverse cose naturali e particolarmente a quelle che ci son portate dall' Indie*, Firenze, 1691.

cial taste for wonders, but also a fascination for machines. Thus he proposes to build *modelli artificiali*, scale models of whirlpools **[32]**. Nature as a Grand Machinery may be reproduced by artificial mechanisms. Also appropriate to his surroundings, the Italian scholar conceives a skiff provided with an apparatus to catch the sea serpent. Having heard that *sciu-orms* likes to encircle boats in their folds, the clever priest suggests arming a small craft with springs ready to grapple with the reptile when it winds itself around the skiff. Negri dedicates a long passage to the description of such a device, worthy of the utopian mind of a scientist from *Nova Atlantis* **[33]**. He hopes that one will find in the sea serpent's body "something useful for medicine". When the *Viaggio* was written, scholars still believed in the curative power of substances extracted from the bodies of legendary creatures, such as the unicorn's horn, the dragon's stone, or a bone from the Brazilian mermaid **[34]**.

Negri's text on the sea serpent will be eagerly annexed by cryptozoologists. Yet this passage should not be segregated from the whole book, and its cultural context, because it only makes sense if reintegrated into the scientific literature of the 17th century. Negri's statement on the *sciu-orm* is conditioned by the intellectual interests of an Italian scholar of his time. Thus, the question of the mysterious genesis of the sea serpent adds fuel to the debate around spontaneous generation. Similarly, technicalities of the hunt for a giant sea monster appeal to an inventive mind, eager for fresh experiments. Francesco Negri is neither an anthropologist, faithfully transmitting beliefs of an exotic people, nor a modern zoologist, describing a still unclassified animal, but a provincial cleric from Galileo's century, awed by a natural world still beyond close scrutiny and precise classification. The Norwegian sea serpent makes sense around 1663-1665. We cannot use Negri's document to retrospectively suggest the reality of the *sjœorm* in 1999.

3. THE *SCIU-CRAK*

Travelling towards the North Cape, the Italian reaches the region of Trondheim. Here are new informants, ready to describe a *pesce di smisurata grandezza*, a fish of inordinate size:

> At the border of the two zones, or a bit further, when the ocean is devoid of *sciu-orms*, or sea serpents, one cannot find common snakes on land. Yet, here begins the territory of an other animal, quite as huge and terrifying as the sea serpent. It is a fish of enormous size called the *sciu-crak* (*sjœkrake*). Its shape is round and flat, fitted with numerous horns or arms; with such horns erected from all parts it encloses the little skiffs of fishermen and try to sink them. [...] The *sciu-crak* allows itself to be seen only for a short time, during the summer solstice, in a dead calm. It ascends very slowly from the depths, back turned upwards, and having run against the fishermen's skiffs, it grips them as I have said before. One can think that this is a common way for it to catch fish for its sustenance and life. But as soon as the fishermen realise that their sounding lines have struck a bottom less deep than they may expect from past experience, or that their lead is weightless, they correctly surmise that the sciu-crak is rising off the depths with line and lead on its back. Then they flee towards a place where this dirty and heavy animal (quel tardo animalaccio) cannot reach them. Some say that the *sciu-crak* may grow to a whale's size. Nobody is eager to catch it **[35]**.

Again, we find this portrait of a Norwegian sea monster wholly congruent with the one offered in Pontoppidan's treatise. First of all, the creature is called by the same name (*crak*, kraken, and *sciu*, sea, therefore the sea kraken). Our authors both insist on its gargantuan size, Negri comparing it to a whale. Furthermore, Pontoppidan, unacquainted with the Italian book, makes use of the *same expression* to describe the kraken, proof that both writers are tapping the same stable oral lore.

Negri: "A shape round and flat, fitted with numerous horns, or arms",

Pontoppidan: "A shape round and flat, and full of arms or branches" **[36]**.

Again, Negri and Pontoppidan use similar terms to show the method used by Norwegian fishermen to detect the hidden presence of the giant under their skiffs: the use of a sounding line to see if the bottom is rising, that is if the kraken is ascending toward the surface.

Francesco Negri doesn't try to bestow a speculative identity on the uncanny dweller in the deep. However, half a century before Pontoppidan, he uses the same strange term of *horns* to designate the arms of the kraken. And this may lead us towards one of the many identities of the sea monster. As I have tried to show, the kraken seems to be a composite creature. Yet it also integrates a strong crustacean layer. Pontoppidan himself says that one of

33 – Negri: *V.S.* Letter 5, p.307.

34 – On the bone from a Brazilian mermaid, see Redi's criticism in: *Esperienze*, pp.67-68.

35 – Negri: *V.S.* Letter 7, pp.355-356.

36 – Pontoppidan, *N.H.* II, p.210.

the names of the dreadful creature is *krabben* **[37]**, that is to say a crab. This definition corresponds closely with the form of the entity as round and flat, with numerous arms. Then the author of the *Natural History*, in a footnote, mentions the extraordinary dimensions of certain overgrown lobsters from Udvaer, on the Norwegian coast, "so large and frightful that the [fishermen] dare not to attack them, and it is said that there is a full fathom betwixt the tips of their claws, by which one may judge of their size, though they are never seen entirely; for they hide themselves in the weeds and rushes, which all lobsters are fond of" **[38]**.

One should remember that Pontoppidan wrote about the kraken that "his whole body does not appear" **[39]**.

Denys de Montfort found an interesting document in this context, but due to his obsession with the giant octopus, could not fully exploit it **[40]**. Six years after the appearance of the *Viaggio Settentrionale*, a German physician called Christian Franz Paullini (1643-1711) published an observation on a bizarre sea monster. Paullini had studied in Denmark, and one of his friends from the Danish-Norwegian kingdom, Ambrosius Rhodius, told him that in the far north, near Wardehus (Vardøhus in Finmark) a huge creature was said to rise from the sea depths, during calm days which were devoid of the slightest breeze. Its form was that of a *crab*, so huge that a whole regiment could easily manæuvre on its back. The monster slowly ascended towards the surface, and its shell, at water level, looked like a mass of moss-covered rocks. If some skiff came too close to the *seekrabbe* (sea crab), it seized it in its pincers, and devoured the crew **[41]**. This crustacean monster closely corresponds to the *kraken*: the same weather conditions for the surface rising, the same habit of gradual ascent, and even the comparison of the crab's back to a group of rock or reefs overgrown with plants. Pontoppidan wrote that the kraken, at first, looked: "like a number of small islands, surrounded with something that floats and fluctuates like sea weeds" **[42]**.

I am fully convinced that *one* of the animals entering into the kraken conglomerate was a magnified crab or sea spider. The *krabben* was indeed a crab. Yet, Denys de Montfort classified the *seekrabbe* as a garbled description of his ubiquitous giant octopuses. Heuvelmans follows along the same cephalopodian lines **[43]**.

4. CONCLUSION

We have not tried to sell any speculative identities for the kraken. On the contrary, renouncing the dogma of a zoological identity for the Norwegian sea monster, we suggest that originally, at the level of folk-culture, the kraken never fit a narrow zoological classification; only later, when scholars tried to solve the riddle in a naturalistic way, is the monster heavily rationalized, made more 'graspable' for learned speculations. From a raw *something* lurking at the bottom of the sea emerged a rare if fully recognized animal, the giant squid. But quite a long time before popularisers, Francesco Negri tried to investigate the secrets of the kraken and of the sea serpent.

Closing this study, let us think fondly of this amiable and bold priest from a distant time, a scholar-adventurer vanishing into oblivion, the first foreigner to have dared to peer through the depths of the Norwegian mind.

---

37 – Pontoppidan, *N.H.* II, p.210.

38 – Pontoppidan, *N.H.* II, p.172.

39 – Pontoppidan, *N.H.* II, p.211.

40 – Denys de Montfort: *Histoire naturelle*, II, p.390.

41 – Christian Franz Paullini: *Observationes medico-physicae*. Heinrich, Leipzig, 1706, II, N° LXX, pp.249-251. Another friend of Paullini described trees on the back of this monster. In a later work, Paullini admits the testimony of a seaman stating that a juniper tree had grown on the back of this sea crab. See C.F. Paullini: *Philosophische Lust-Stunden*. Stösseln, Frankfurt-Leipzig, 1709, pp.195-197. This motif unmasks the relationship between the *seekrabbe* and the beast-island, sometimes interpreted as a giant whale with a wood on its back.

42 – Pontoppidan, *N.H.* II, p.211. According to Jan Haugum, a Norwegian biologist and linguist: "A *krakenbanke* was a reef or bank where the water was shallower than it was supposed to be, because there was a huge *krake* lying on the bottom". See Richard Ellis: *The Search for the Giant Squid*, p.17. In this modernised version of the legend the kraken, rather than being a moving reef itself, is merely seen as an inhabitant of it.

43 – Heuvelmans: *Le kraken*, pp.186-192. For Haugum: "*Krabben* is a complete misnomer, since it simply means 'crab'." Ellis: *Giant Squid*, p.17. Clinging to narrow cephalopodian definitions of the kraken, Haugum misses the original plurality of the entity, and its crustacean associations as well.